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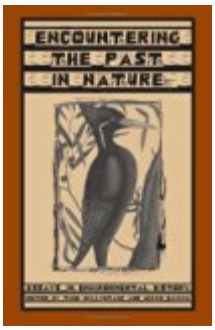

Timo Myllyntaus, Mikko Saikku, eds.. *Encountering the Past in Nature: Essays in Environmental History.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001. xix + 166 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8214-1357-9.

Reviewed by Michael Egan

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This is a gem of a book that ought to be read by all environmental historians to remind us what we do and why. This small collection of essays by Finnish scholars establishes the basic tenets of environmental history as a field of inquiry. While the authors cover a lot of familiar ground, I have found the authors' clear and refreshing synthesis of the field's principles particularly helpful in re-articulating environmental history's place in my own work. Indeed, the book's strength lies in its exceptional clarity of writing and of purpose. As such, it would make an excellent course text for undergraduate and graduate courses in environmental history.

Editors Timo Myllyntaus and Mikko Saikku open this anthology with an engaging historiographic review of environmental history in Finland, and with reference to the United States. They point to the similarities that exist between these two countries with respect to their environmental histories, arguing that they both experienced late population growth and relatively late industrialization and urbanization compared with other western nations. Since both were originally on the periphery of the greater European economic system, they became hinterlands shipping raw materials and semi-refined products to their ruling kingdoms--Finland to Sweden and the American colonies to Great Britain (p. 16). As their natural resources were of considerable economic significance to their ruling kingdoms, they were of even more vital importance in the subsequent industrialization and self-sovereignty of these two countries, in each case at the expense of native populations. Finland and the United States share a legacy of reliance on natural resources--particularly timber and hydropower--that have only been dominated by human populations relatively recently (over the last three centuries).

Scholars of American environmental history will be familiar with the many texts the authors use to support their arguments; all the "usual suspects" are included in the footnotes. More striking, however, is the authors' rather clever reversal of the traditional central tenet of environmental history. Whereas environmental historians have for years tried to promote the inclusion of nature in human history, the authors argue that

"environmental history emphasizes the role of humans as an integral part of their natural surroundings" (p. 2). This intriguing transposition ultimately changes little with respect to environmental history's ambitions, but it does speak directly to the question of this field's relevance and relative acceptance. That is not to say that the authors eschew notions of nature's agency, but rather that they accept it as a universal given before concentrating on how human agency interacts with it.

Early in their essay, Myllyntaus and Saikku state that "modern environmental history strives for a fuller understanding of today's environmental issues and may even provide data for contemporary problem solving" (p. 2). The essays throughout the collection are presented in a format that demonstrates how environmental history might be useful to policy makers, but the essays also address more scholarly debates. Foremost is the concept of wilderness. Myllyntaus and Saikku note that one of the most noticeable distinctions between Finnish and American environmental histories revolves around notions of wild spaces. The authors suggest that the Finnish customary concept of wilderness (***er=maadoes***) does not imply a completely intact or virgin nature, but rather translates as hunting ground. In comparison, the Finnish ***er=maa*** seems far more practical than Anglo-American ideas of wilderness as a pure and original nature outside of human influence.

Constructions and deconstructions of wilderness have been a fiery source of debate for a number of years, and the anthology's next offering, Ari Aukusti Lehtinen's "Modernization and the Concept of Nature: On the Reproduction of Environmental Stereotypes," stokes that debate. As with Myllyntaus and Saikku's historiographic review, Lehtinen's essay is effective in clearly framing the context of the existing debate. Lehtinen echoes important works by William Cronon and Carolyn Merchant, arguing that conditions of modernization resulted in the creation of a dualism in our conceptions of nature. On the one hand, nature continues to be a raw material that contributes to industrial development, while on the other nature has become an object to be conserved. This conservationist impulse has led to a desire to conserve a nature that is outside the human domain, but Lehtinen--like Cronon--asks how we can conceive of pure or wild nature without constructions. "This chapter," Lehtinen states, "argues that the concept of nature as lying beyond the human realm is an abstraction that dominates our understanding of and interrelations with nature" (p. 31). It is a familiar argument; Lehtinen continues that this approach suffers from anthropocentric conceit insofar as we tend to forget that we treat nature as "other" in exactly the manner that we have learned to know it. To Lehtinen the real culprit is modernization, which sees nature as "other," thereby establishing a faulty external reality that we can categorize. Lehtinen's synthesis of the wilderness debate is well organized and clearly delivered, but it reiterates Cronon's critique and does not complicate the debate further. Further, it falls down at the same point as have other arguments in this vein. While I remain somewhat sympathetic to the claims that Lehtinen is making, I am bothered by the continued oversimplification of the wilderness movement and of environmentalism more generally in this argument. Lehtinen's treatment of environmentalism is problematically one-dimensional; it strikes me that in order to revive this debate a more sophisticated diagnosis of the environmental movement's contributions and foibles needs to be developed. Readers looking here for a second coming of the wilderness debate will be disappointed as Lehtinen, in effect, paints the environmental movement with broad brush strokes while condemning western values--and their self-proclaimed omniscience--for doing just that in their conceptions of nature and wilderness. Nevertheless, Lehtinen asks important and provocative questions: Is there a distinction between conservationism and

environmentalism? "[A]re we, as nature researchers, conservationists, or environmentalists, still hostages to this project of modernization" (p. 34)? What are the ultimate implications of (and potential solutions to) seeing nature as "other"? In raising these questions, Lehtinen's essay is a worthwhile addition, which helps in broadening the scope of this anthology.

If Lehtinen's essay is provocative, Ismo Bj=rn's discussion of the Karelia forests is instructive, not only as a compelling case study but also in demonstrating the range and possibilities of environmental history as a discipline. Bj=rn presents a rich history of the North Karelian Biosphere Reserve in eastern Finland, and his narrative might serve as a useful model for scholars working on landscape histories generally. His essay effectively offers a standard declensionist narrative of an untouched ecosystem that experiences gradual decline as a result of human disturbance, but the story is complicated at every turn. Bj=rn leads readers through landscapes changed by evolving human economies, from hunter-gatherer economies to post-industrial economies which read nature as more than simply an extractive resource, noting that "change in the use of the forest has not been discussed enough" (p. 69). Indeed, further landscape analysis of this type would be most welcome. As Finland industrialized, and limited quantities of iron were found, people were able to dissociate themselves from the energy supplied by local production. Karelia became a part of a much larger market marking its introduction as an industrialized society as food and other items were brought to the area from the outside rather than being farmed nearby. All concentration was on the forest and its resources: "the natural forest was to become an industrial forest, an investment to be grown" (p. 67). After much deforestation, the iron-melting industry abandoned the region. Karelia has since been revived as a cottage haven, but Bj=rn concludes by warning that this new form of holidaying causes considerable ecological damage to the "natural" amenities people coming to the region treasure the most.

The two penultimate essays leave Finland for Thailand and the United States. In such a small book, two international case studies might seem out of place, but their inclusion complements the Finnish pieces methodologically. They are valuable in and of themselves, but they also contribute to a sense that the book's discussion is relevant outside of Finland. Olavi Luukkanen's fascinating essay examines forest depletion in Thailand. Thailand's deforestation, he argues, is a unique case study because commercial logging is banned and there exists "no substantial forest management in indigenous forests for commercial production purposes" (p. 87). Therefore, changes in the forest are caused by factors other than industrial forestry. In his equally interesting essay on the extinct ivory-billed woodpecker of the southeastern United States, Mikko Saikku makes useful connections between wildlife species and ecosystem health, arguing that the bird's disappearance is indicative of significant change in the southeastern hardwood forests as a result of commercial industrialization and development.

Encountering the Past in Nature concludes with a concise chapter by Myllyntaus which might easily have served as an alternative introduction, as he outlines the parameters of environmental history as a discipline. While he recognizes that the history of the environment is a relatively recent endeavor, Myllyntaus points to old roots, and works he identifies as "instinctive" environmental history. As with every essay in this book, the conclusion is clear and accessible, and Myllyntaus makes good use of this instinctive environmental history in establishing a useful, larger historiographic framework for environmental history.

Critics might regret the book's heavy concentration on timber and forest history as not being wholly representative of environmental history--an urban case study could have made a welcome

addition--but environmental historians of the non-woodland ilk might likely still find much to recommend this title. It remains an exceptionally clear and accessible exposition of environmental history's methodologies and the potentials of its narratives. Indeed, non-forest historians might well find inspiration herein for the framing or constructing of their own narratives.

Nor should Americanists nor non-Scandinavianists be scared off in spite of the book's relatively Finnish emphasis. As Myllyntaus and Saikku argue in their preface and in the historiographic essay, environmental degradation has become a global problem and a deeper understanding of contemporary environmental problems requires that we appreciate the significance of these problems' histories. Speaking comparatively, Myllyntaus and Saikku correctly claim that "the study of environmental history will help us find some common ground in that quest" (p. 20). ***Encountering the Past in Nature*** is an excellent step toward realizing that common ground.